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ABSTRACT

To show the shortcomings of concentrating on the teaching of sentences and paragraphs in basic writing courses, this paper points out problems encountered by one teacher who attempted to use that approach. The paper describes how the teacher discovered that teaching the rules and concepts of grammar and writing stifles students' creativity, intellectual exploration and development, and attempts at demanding college-level work, while encouraging a belief in rules and definitions. The solutions presented in the paper for teaching writing effectively involve fostering free writing, classroom discussion, and assignments requiring using the native ordering power of students' minds. Concluding with an expression of faith in the abilities of basic writing students (as opposed to the pervasive belief in their organizational deficiencies), the paper states that to teach sentences and paragraphs is to give students the wrong impressions of what they can do and of what writing is all about. (EL)

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On Not Teaching Sentences and Paragraphs

I had been to New York. I had been to the Four C's. I had seen the world. But I was almost felled by a simple question in a job interview at a small state college in a small western town. The position advertised was for an instructor of basic writing. The astounding question was, "How would you teach Writing 040, a course in sentences?" My mind whirled. Do people do things like that? Then came the second blow: "How would you teach Writing 115, a course in paragraphs?" So disoriented was I, I cannot remember my answer, but I think I mumbled something to the effect of never having thought of sentences in isolation from other sentences or paragraphs unattached to other paragraphs. No, no I hadn't understood, they countered. It was perfectly permissible for students to write more than one sentence and paragraph in either case, but what was important in each course, respectively, were sentences and paragraphs. "Students in Writing 040 have trouble writing at the sentence level," was the final hint.

I did not think I was in the company of reasonable people. But in a quirk of fate, I was hired.

Fortunately there was Mina Shaughnessy, whom I consulted about a course in sentences. Here I was chastened by the fact that better minds than mine had taught courses in sentences--in fact, while reading Errors and Expectations straight through for the first time, I began to wonder if that (better minds) wasn't what was required. It was a linguist's or a grammarian's task. She taught a mixture of grammar and a kind of sentence combining, but differently than I had ever seen it done. What was different was the pedagogical metholodology and the assumptions behind it. College-level basic writers were to be taught grammar, but not as grammar-school children. These were adult human beings with

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fully functioning adult minds that were capable of and in need of conceptualizing. The motivation for learning grammar she thought to be different as well, for these adults were painfully aware of their perceived "deficiencies" and would be eager to apply their knowledge of grammar directly to their compositions at the proofreading stage. After her course in grammar and sentence-building, one student, whom Shaughnessy claimed was a

> timid writer at the outset of the semester, ventured this sentence when asked in an exam...to add adverbial modifiers to the base, "The problem will be solved": "The problem will be solved with the help of the Almighty, who, except for an occasional thunderstorm, reigns unmolested, high in the heavens above, when all of us, regardless of race or religious differences can come together and study this severe problem inside and out, all day and night if necessary, and are able to come to you on that great gettin' up morning and say, 'Mrs. Shaughnessy, we do know our verbs and adverbs.'" (p. 132)

The clouds parted. My heart was cheered. I could teach sentences.

I became in fact a rather zealous teacher of sentences and a good one. My students, too, were fellow sojourners in the faith, burning to find the answers to ever more questions about the arcane mysteries of the sentence. Daily they posed problems and daily we worked out solutions. They began the quarter by unanimously declaring that "here" in the sentence "I am here today" was a verb. They ended the quarter (most of them, that is) finding verbs and subjects almost unerringly. Except with unusually long or complicated sentences, they could identify independent and dependent clauses. Tests I gave bore witness to their newfound proficiency. So strong was the appeal that the vocabulary of grammar carried itself outside of our classroom and into the burrows of other English faculty, one of whom confessed to me a fear that some of my students might show up in her class next quarter to publicly humiliate her with syntactical technicalities she couldn't answer. "Honestly, I don't know these things!" she gasped. Ms. Dixon's army of basic writer grammarians was marching on The Academy, ready to claim its place and demand its rights in respectable utterances composed entirely of complete sentences!

As I began my second term in teaching sentences, I was an even better teacher of grammar, and I began to do it with all haste. The first term the books were late arriving, and I had extemporized by having the students write introductions of one another for the class. Without our books to rush to, we savored this assignment. Students listened to the introductions and responded to them: what did they like, what did they feel confused by or dislike about each paper? I asked. There was quite a bit to admire in these first papers, and the students could easily identify successful passages once I encouraged them to trust their perceptions. One student had made his partner's skin-diving hobby come alive through the story of an underwater encounter with a sand shark. "I liked the sand shark," said one listener to universal murmurings of approval. Many weeks later when that same class was about to work on papers (whose ultimate fate was to be proofread, of course), I asked them what, besides sentence structure, was important in a paper. They offered a few suggestions shyly. Then I asked, what do you remember from your responses to the introductions at the beginning of the quarter? Immediately came the cry that it be interesting! Do you remember anything interesting? I asked. The sand shark! they cried.

The mysteries of grammar, how stoutly they must be propounded, but the mysteries of rhetoric, how lightly do they touch the heart!

During the second quarter, as I say, I was a better teacher of grammar. Our introductions were perfunctory and we got down to business quickly. The good students matched my efficiency--well enough to be a little disheartening. They were lapping up the grammar, but to an even greater extent than my first class, they had little regard for their writing otherwise. Finally I saw I had to temper this monomaniacal enthusiasm, so I began to ask them to freewrite Don Murray style. Write about whatever's on your mind, I told them, until I ask you to stop. They unquestioningly obeyed my strange request, obedient as proper grammarians will be. Then I asked them to finish their last thoughts, and stop. Now, I said, look back over your freewriting and find something that

interests you, or something surprising, in what you've written. Underline it or mark it. They did. I started with the best student in the class. "Kerry, what did you find surprising or interesting?"

"I found subordination."

It had occurred to me during the first quarter that my students were not writing great gettin' up sentences, though they certainly produced some good possibilities; this quarter it was clear they wouldn't have recognized a great gettin' up in the morning if it had stood up and crowed full feather before them. But could they at least proofread for fragments and run-ons? I thought so at the time. We always applied our lessons as soon as we could to their compositions (though the compositions were not substantively very serious, they did produce several), and I and a couple of peer tutors regularly visited with each student as she was proofreading papers. As I say, it seemed to be working, and yet I don't really know. It might have been, looking back on it, that the students benefitted as much from the attentions of me and the tutors as from the grammar. That just looking closely at their writing regularly, being shown what a fragment and run-on were, and being asked to correct them on the spot might have been enough to account for the improvement I saw. This is the method I had used previously as a tutor in a writing lab and which John Rouse uses in "Scenes From a Writing Workshop."

Now, Patrick Hartwell, in his article, "Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar," says (without savaging Mina Shaughnessy, bless him), that people do not learn grammar by concept, and if he's right, that would help explain the fairly consistent failure of my students to truly conceptualize; they often backslid to rules. But whether they learned concepts or rules, I kept wondering if a knowledge of grammar really improved their writing. Was it worth the considerable effort we all put into it? My advice to would-be sentence teachers: when True Faith has fled, give up the Grammar Ship. And so

I have. The place of grammar--and all sentence-level work has shrunk to a vestige of its original size. I now believe it will take years for my basic writing students to learn to fix, or not make, fragment, run-on and syntax errors. And in the meantime, I intend to teach writing.

But not paragraphs.

If one wished to turn to a mentor for advice in the teaching of paragraphs, one would find no difficulty. But even among Mina Shaughnessy's own disciples, I fear, one could not find anyone speaking of paragraphs as inspiringly as Shaughnessy speaks of sentences. What one finds instead, is Harvey S. Wiener, in The Writing Room: A Resource Book for Teachers of English, writing:

> For advanced writers the topic sentence is an elastic entity, appearing here and there or not at all in a paragraph, especially if the paragraph is part of several in a long essay. For inexperienced writers, however, the topic sentence, which generalizes from the ideas the writer has gathered haphazardly on paper, is often the first formal attempt to impose order on random thought. Such a sentence has a central role in the development of the writer's ideas. In a one-paragraph theme, I always urge the beginner to offer the topic sentence as the first sentence. There it becomes a signal to the reader of the writer's exact purpose right from the start. In that position it is also easy for the writer to locate when he looks back. And in checking back, by re-reading the topic sentence frequently, writers can test the degree to which the detail they offer supports the topic idea without drifting off. (p. 63)

Now, I must accord Mr. Wiener his due respect as an experienced teacher of basic writing in the New York City Community College system, and I will allow for the possibility that he and I have encountered a different population of students. No one to my knowledge has studied the rural basic writer--perhaps our experiences do not properly compare. But besides my first objection, which is that generalization can be taught in other ways than by the ritualistic deformation of paragraphs, I must voice an important question: why are Mr. Wiener's students writing "one paragraph themes"? Is it because his classes are so large (or that he has so many classes) that he hasn't time to read longer papers, or is it that he believes his students cannot--or for some reason should not--write more? I would guess, from his emphasis on organiza-

tion, that he feels his students are struggling so hard with even the simplest organizational strategies, that he wishes not to tax them further.

The best companion I can name to Mr. Wiener's book is Mike Rose's "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and A Proposal." In this article, Rose suggests involving basic writers in writing tasks that prepare them for the kinds of composing tasks they are likely to do in other college coursework. Instead of repeating Rose's critique, which, by the way, is educational not only for its departure from the standard basic writing and freshman comp fare, but for its numerous examples of ingenious teaching strategies, I would pose a related question: why is it so many of us prefer a tiny, perfected artifact to a longer perhaps imperfect but more serious paper? Don't such preferences on our part reinforce the problem that grammar studies and concentration on sentence-level errors begins? That correctness and formal properties take precedence over intellectual exploration and development and an attempt to do real, demanding college-level work?

The first task in moving toward college-level work is to get words down on paper, lots of them. I have seen many a student capable of a reasonably ordered paragraph with topic sentence et. al. who cannot, when asked, produce more. For that reason, I nearly always ask my basic writers now to write papers of at least 250-300 words, and I give them numerous in-class freewriting assignments to show them they can indeed get that many--and more--words onto paper. I have discovered that even the most cramped writing can be expanded through freewriting: even ESL students can freewrite much more easily than they think. Besides liberating them from constriction, freewriting has a few other salutary effects on basic writers. I believe it actually helps alleviate some syntax errors, since some of the worst, as Shaughnessy pointed out, arise from cramped hands and minds, attempting desperately to sound educated. And since language is by definition discursive, as Ann Berthoff reminds us, idea naturally

gets joined to idea, a process which eventually may lead to something good. It's even possible that a primed freewriter will produce near-final-form prose, already shaped into something resembling...paragraphs.

The reason why this can happen with freewriting is perhaps related to the way the mind works as an orderer. If one accepts the theories of Susanne Langer, one comes to see the mind as a natural orderer. Langer says we perceive all the world through symbols, that creating intelligible forms is what we spend every moment of every day doing. Ann Berthoff exhorts us to take this native ordering power, which is already put to good use in other spheres of our students' lives, and transfer its use to the solution of writing problems that are also thinking problems. This requires the composition instructor to be a better designer of assignments, and Berthoff herself often uses assignments that encourage students to notice the form inherent in organic objects like sea shells and pine cones.

I used her idea and borrowed ape skulls and a human skull and femur from our anthropology professor. I asked the students to describe their chosen object so thoroughly and accurately that a reader would know what they were describing even though the object's common name never appeared in the description. I impressed the students with a reminder that such close observation is stock in trade for anthropologists and anthropology students. They did a lot of observing on their own, my students, but also answered questions like "How would you take this object apart?" (a "Metaphor for Priming the Pump" from Peter Elbow). Here is one response to that question from a student who normally wrote in fairly slick imitation of the First Sentence Topic Sentence model paragraph:

> The object that sits on the table before me, is not my favorite thing to look at. If I could, I would take it apart.
>
> First of all, I would take off the two springs that are on either side of his jaw that helps connect his head to its jaw, so his head and jaw wouldn't be held together. I would pull out all his teeth with some sort of instrument, I don't really care with what instrument, as long as it pulls the teeth out. My next step would be to take his whole head and drop it on the floor and hopefully it would break in tiny little pieces. I would take his jaw and

> also do the same thing. If that does not work, I would then find an ax and ax it down. When I get them all in tiny little pieces, I would put them in a grinder and grind it all up. Then finally, I would put the powdery substance into a wood stove and burn it.
>
> Why do I dislike this object so much? Well, for one reason it reminds me of death. I am furiously afraid of dying and when you die, that's all that is left, your remain.

In class, I asked my students to read this piece and to summarize the second paragraph. We tried using the summary for a topic sentence: "I would take several several steps to take the object apart. First of all, I would take off the two springs..." Then I asked them to compare the two versions and decide which they preferred. The choice for the original version was overwhelming, as it should have been. This neat little composition, full of energy and very well organized indeed, would have been impossible had I enforced a First Sentence Topic Sentence rule on my students.

The piece would also have lost a great deal were I to have made the artificial decree that paragraphs one and three be "fully developed." What a repetitious and sloppy mess would have resulted had I required the author to describe the object more fully in paragraph one (that job gets done admirably well in paragraph two). And that last paragraph gets its punch in part from its brevity. But at quarter's end, this student was the onlyone who felt that the most important thing missing in the course was more instruction on writing introduction and conclusions. That's symptomatic of the disease we English teachers spread.

My guess is that Mr. Wiener and others who share his point of view would point out that paragraph two of my student's essay is a piece of narration, the simplest form-making available to our basic writing students, and as such, intellectually inferior to the higher exercise of generalization that making a topic sentence requires. My first response to that observation would be that yes, we see narration at work in paragraph two, but we don't see it in paragraphs one and three. That should stand as an indication that assignments like "Write a narra-

tive paragraph" require our students to commit unnatural acts (unnatural even and especially for writers). Narrative paragraphs crop up quite naturally within a whole composition composed of other rhetorical modes whenever the task seems to lend itself to narration. My second response would be to note that there is more than simple narration going on here, for one can infer the form of the object she's viewing by following the sequence of steps she's taking to dismantle it in her imagination. Her attention to that form has moved her mind to analyze its composition. I believe the student finished the assignment with new knowledge--or perhaps more conscious knowledge--about form in general and skulls in particular, not to mention what she knows about her feelings about death.

Obviously, there are plenty of students who don't write paragraphs that work as well as the one quoted above. In class we look at those too, and discuss ways they might be recast. There are even some basic writers who require being told that papers have margins and paragraphs indentations. But these are not profound problems. Often, with very little direction at all, the students end up with some rough and ready paragraphs which themselves can be re-viewed and reconsidered for the appropriateness of the connections made, sentence to sentence, idea to idea.

All of this is hard work, it's true, but not as hard, I think, as Mr. Wiener makes it sound. The only students I've found who have truly gathered ideas "haphazardly" and are attempting,for the first time in their lives, "to impose order on random thought" are students who are profoundly mentally impaired or emotionally damaged. Normally intelligent and stable students can and will make connections between ideas readily. They don't do it on paper easily, sometimes, because they just didn't know that's what's writers do. My students and I are both surprised and pleased when it begins to dawn on them that this is what writing is. I count it the greatest of triumphs when my students understand that revising is not correcting misspellings or correcting grammar, but making connections clearer.

If our basic writers have the motivation and the encouragement to make connections and forms with their writing, they will. We will have to push them at times, which is precisely the opposite of offering them definitions of topic sentences or anything else. Like anybody who isn't quite sure that the work is worth it, they'll clutch at ready-made prescriptions and formulas instead of sweating to work out carefully those complex connections. Seeing how the infamous five-paragraph essay has stifled the creativity (and yes, the critical thinking) of our better students, I can't see why we should import this virus to our basic writers too. In any good-sized class, there is usually one student who is already savvy to pre-fab essay forms. When we have such a sample before us, my students and I judge it for its merits and demerits, just like we judge the rest. Usually, we find that it is more effective for some kinds of writing than it is for others. I say "my students and I" in hopes of showing that my students do indeed have some sense of rhetorical strategies. They do. And my job is to make them aware of what they already have and to build upon that foundation.

Doubtless I have already made my case as well as I can, but I would like to quote from one more composition textbook, one used until recently in our own program, that might serve to illustrate how pervasive are the beliefs in basic writers' organizational deficiencies. In Paragraph Practice: Writing the Paragraph and the Short Composition, Kathleen E. Sullivan gives this advice to the student:

> You should pretend that the topic sentence always begins the paragraph, at first, even though it doesn't. Advanced or professional writers state the topic at various places in the paragraph. Some writers do not state it at all but rather suggest it with other parts of the paragraph. However, you are a beginning rather than a professional or advanced writer; therefore, the first sentence you put on paper should be your topic sentence in order to remind you as well as to tell your reader what your topic is. (p. 19)

Now I am sure Ms. Sullivan doesn't wish to condescend to her students. She must really believe that they need this sort of tutelage. She is careful to give definitions she hopes they will understand. For instance, a topic sentence

is not just the proverbial old "main idea" of the paragraph: "The paragraph should have unity. Unity means the paragraph should be of one piece, a distinct unit that has one fundamental purpose." (p. 13)

But I can almost guarantee her, or anyone who so attempts to give these subtle definitions to basic writers, that the sum will be boiled down to: the topic sentence is the main idea of the paragraph, which, by the way, is perilously close to most basic writers' definition of the sentence, "a complete idea." Like many of us, basic writers like pithy definitions. Pocket-sized proverbs are easy to memorize and for many basic writers, knowledge is memorization. Writing is rarely conceived of as an ability or a process; instead, it's a discreet set of instructions, morals, or principles that, practiced faithfully, will inevitably yield the right results. This certainly is naive, and it may have something to do with cognitive development, I don't know. But we will have to place some of our own colleagues (especially the textbook-writing kind) at that same stage if we are in the business of plotting intellectual maturity. How else but by reference to cognitive development, or to a naive epistemology, can we possibly explain the odd assumption that students learn to write by mastering ever larger components of the theme or essay? Creating an essay is emphatically not the same as piling sentence upon sentence, paragraph upon paragraph until the stack is of the requisite dimensions. Nor is a paragraph a paragraph by attaining the right degree of squareness (yes, some basic writing texts even show students what shape paragraphs should be).

Besides a too-keen belief in rules and definitions, my basic writers subscribe to another fallacy which, unfortunately, is also fully supported by texts and many English teachers. Once they determine that the problem in their papers was not the misapplication of a precept, they tend to think that it must be they haven't worked hard enough, haven't produced enough material. Our students have read well the message of our quantitative society which worships "productivity," just as they often read our messages well. When I hand back

their first set of papers, some students eye me knowingly and say, "I know what you want. You want details. More DE-tails." A topic sentence and plenty of details equals a nice, square paragraph. Students who think like that will produce paragraphs composed of lists, which do indeed fit neatly under topic sentences. Trouble is, lists aren't very interesting precisely because they demand so little intellectually of both reader and writer. Richard Ohmann, in his piece, "Use Specific, Concrete Language" complains similarly about English teachers' overemphasis on details above interesting generalizations. To be general is not to be colorful, acoording to many English teachers, and yet it is also true that analytical thinking--a quality in writing one would have thought at least as important as mere color-- can only be achieved through generalization. I debunk the detail myth by pointing dramatically to to floor and enhorting my students to"look at the floor, at all that dirt, those scraps of papers, wads of gum. If you just sweep it all into one pile and stick a label on it, do you think you won't have garbage anymore? No! You'll still have garbage, but in a pile!"

The final problem with teaching paragraphs is that you are teaching paragraphs. Consider the title, again, of Ms. Sullivan's Paragraph Practice: Writing the Paragraph and the Short Composition. The implicit message is that writing paragraphs is somehow different from some other writing. I can assure you our basic writers catch the implication. They are quite concerned to know just what we mean by paragraphs. Themes. Essays. But the way for them to learn is by doing the writing, not by learning someone else's definitions. Because, if we are honest, we must admit to them that good definitions for such things--useful in all circumstances and situations--do not exist. Knowledge about writing, like any other kind of knowledge, is contextual. Arthur A. Stern, in a piece entitled "When is a Paragraph?" states it this way:

> In sum, today's paragraph is not a logical unit and we should stop telling our students it is. It does not necessarily begin with a topic sentence; it does not necessarily 'handle and exhaust a distinct topic,' as the

> textbooks say it must do. It is not a composition-in-miniature, either--it is not an independent, self-contained whole but a functioning part of discourse; its boundaries are not sealed but open to the surrounding text; it links as often as it divides. Shaped by the writer's individual style and by the reader's expectations as well as by the logic of the subject-matter, the paragraph is a flexible, expressive rhetorical instrument.
>
> Perhaps some day it will be possible to teach paragraphing by rule and formula, though I frankly doubt it. In any case, the rules and formulas that govern the paragraphing practices of professional writers have yet to be discovered. Let us, therefore, focus our students' attention on what they have to say--on the arguments they want to present, the points they want to make--and not on the number of indentations they should use in saying it. Let us make them think about the topics they plan to discuss rather than about the "correct" location of their topic sentences. Let us, in other words, make our teaching discourse-centered. If the whole does indeed determine the parts, their paragraphs should improve as their essays mold them into form. (p. 300)

To teach sentences and paragraphs is to give our students the wrong impression of what their able minds can do and the wrong impression of what writing is about. It would be better for all concerned, I would think, if we teachers of basic writing put less distance between our own thinking and writing habits and those of our students. Our students are not floundering in chaos, not much more than we are, anyway. They are not grammarless--they do speak and write systematically, as Shaughnessy and others have shown us. They do own ordering minds that daily shape their sense of reality. They have, as does anyone who uses language in any social context, certain rhetorical skills and instincts. They certainly do write less sophisticatedly than we, and there may well be some cognitive differences between us. But their powers are recognizably ours. We would do well to remember that they are intellectually, and in every other way, much like us.

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